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WASHINGTON TIMES
12 May 1987

U.S. Central America policy in state of crisis

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Reagan's failure to develop a clear Central American policy has created a credibility crisis within his own party that threatens continued U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan resistance.

That failure helped spark the Iran-Contra affair and increased feuding among State Department and CIA officials over the best U.S. approach in Central America.

NEWS ANALYSIS

P "People don't have a clear idea of what our goals are and what we want to accomplish," said an aide to House Minority Leader Robert Michel, Illinois Republican.

Robert McFarlane, a former White House national security adviser and a key player in the Iran-Contra affair, yesterday told a congressional panel that the administration had failed to develop a coherent policy for Central America.

"A thorough and concerted analysis of our Nicaraguan problem would have produced a clear definition of U.S. interests in Nicaragua, an identification of threats to those interests, a listing of U.S. and allied resources at our disposal, a laying out of the political, economic, and military options," Mr. McFarlane told the House-Senate committee that began its second week of hearings on the Iran-Contra affair.

"But this type of fundamental, governmentwide analysis was never made," Mr. McFarlane said.

Republican congressional leaders

— Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole, Kansas Republican, and Mr. Michel — have insisted that the administration review long-term U.S. goals in the region if it wants to continue the flow of weapons to the Nicaraguan resistance.

Mr. Dole and Mr. Michel have advised the administration to enunciate clearly the rationale for providing further military aid to the Contras. The strategy must be communicated clearly to the American people if the administration is sincere about sustaining support in Congress for the rebels.

Mr. Reagan consistently has talked of the national security threat

that the Marxist Sandinista government poses to the United States as a reason to aid the Nicaraguan resistance. The so-called Reagan Doctrine calls for the United States to back forces fighting communist regimes.

But many lawmakers, embarrassed about U.S. support of the Somoza regime that the Sandinistas overturned, are not willing to finance an anti-communist resistance unless they believe the movement would install a non-repressive government.

An aide to Mr. Dole went even further.

"Our position is aid to the Contras self, is not a policy. It makes sense only as part of a broader policy," the Dole aide said. "Everything has gotten a little out of focus."

In addressing the American Newspaper Publishers Association in New York early this month, Mr. Reagan seemed to take the Republican leaders' advice to heart. He

launched a renewed public campaign in support of the resistance that focuses more on democracy and free elections than on combat.

"The democratic Nicaraguan resistance, including the freedom fighters, today offers the only political alternative to the dictatorship of the past and the communism of today; that alternative is democracy, and it is winning increasing support from the people of Nicaragua," Mr. Reagan said.

But while Mr. Reagan is on the offensive, administration officials say behind the scenes they have nothing new to sell their policy.

"There is no rabbit to be pulled out of a hat," one administration official said. But the official also said that scrambling for new ways to sell Contra aid "is a phony issue."

"The real issue is, 'Are we going to do anything in Central America or not?' How many times do we have to say that we are supporting democracy? How much stronger can we get?"

P Rep. Henry Hyde, an Illinois Republican and member of the special congressional committee probing the Iran-Contra affair, says Contra aid "is still winnable" if the administration undertakes a full-scale pub-

lic campaign.

"Most Americans don't know a Sandinista from a Contra," he said.

Of the ongoing congressional hearings, Mr. Hyde said: "Anything that is a distraction, a diversion, a detraction from the policy provides raw meat for our adversaries.

"But common sense is always an unknown factor in these things. As time goes on, people are becoming more and more aware that the Sandinistas are a security threat for us," he said.

Besides the dicey question of the congressional Iran-Contra hearings, further aid depends on these factors:

- The peace initiative sponsored by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez. If it fails, blame will be placed on several quarters.

If the Sandinista government walks away from negotiations, it probably would help the Contra aid package in Congress. If the United States is blamed for negotiation breakdown, then it could hurt further aid to the resistance in Congress.

- The Contras' battle success. Since the rebels now have some \$70

million in fresh military aid, fighting is key this year to sustain aid. The Contras have overrun two Sandinista military outposts, and have partially blown up a power station near Managua. But to continue aid, said an aide to a key swing voter, "They have to put the lights out in Managua for two weeks, not just for two hours."

- The third key to further aid is the Contra leadership. A rebel assembly is continuing to meet this week in Miami to elect a new, seven-member directorate. The cohesion of a diverse group of rebel leaders is necessary to show Congress that the forces it is sponsoring have democratic intentions. It's also important to show they are more interested in battling the Sandinista government than "picking at each other like dogs," as one proponent of further aid described their past bickering.

But many aid supporters say an ongoing review is especially painful since it seemed as if they had turned the corner on Contra aid when Congress approved the \$100 million in aid for the rebels last fall.

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Instead of selling Contra aid to the American people last year, the administration put together a package to satisfy the complaints of a number of key lawmakers concerned about the makeup and control of the resistance forces.

That package crumbled when Arturo Cruz, a Sandinista revolutionary who abandoned the new government because he believed it was becoming as repressive a government as the one it had overturned, resigned from the rebels' umbrella organization — the United Nicaraguan Opposition.